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ABSTRACT

In order to develop language awareness and critical thinking skills, an introductory writing course was taught at the community college level in three phases. First, the subjectivity of perceived reality and language choice was demonstrated through use of photographs, prose, and poetry. The second phase dealt with the role of language in defining and understanding experience. In the third phase, George Orwell's principles of Newspeak and doublespeak from "1984" served as a frame of reference to guide students to see through cultural myths and the language system used to sustain them. (Appropriate textbooks are suggested, and class exercises and assignments are described in detail. (CC)

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Seeing Through Words

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The deliberate ambiguity in the title, "Seeing Through Words," illustrates two of the principles I considered in developing students' critical thinking in a community college writing course. The first, and most obvious, is that language is frequently ambiguous and, therefore, in need of an analysis that first acknowledges the ambiguity and then considers alternative meanings.

In this case, all interpretations of "seeing through words," are intended since they are often the objectives of most introductory writing courses. One is to develop students' awareness of language as a lens that shapes what we "see" and perceive as we look through it; another objective is to understand the nature of the lens itself so that we can shape it to reflect a clearer image of what we have experienced and what we mean.

These principles operate from both sides of the communication process -- when students receive a message and learn to "see through" by interpreting and understanding what they read as well as when they initiate a written message for others to "see through" their symbols to the meaning.

These principles became an integral part of the six-hour (2 hrs. sessions) freshman English course I developed that

CS204065

included expository writing, critical thinking and an introduction to literature. The task seemed formidable, calling for high motivation and sophisticated reading and writing skills from community college students. My approach, however, was to make "language awareness" the substance of the course and apply principles of language "seen" in exposition to those in poetry and fiction as special languages. Whether reading fiction or non-fiction, or writing a theme, the objective throughout was to encourage students to apply their "language awareness" to their own writing and thinking. The assumption was that the principles they could recognize in someone else's writing could be recognized in their own.

Language awareness and critical thinking were developed through three phases. The first demonstrated the subjectivity of "perceived reality" and language choice, initially in psycho-social biography found in photographs, prose and poetry. The second demonstrated the role of language in defining and understanding what we experience. When students saw how language shaped thinking and behavior in the politics of the Watergate cover-up, the selling of the president and in racist and sexist stereotyped definitions of people, they became more motivated not only to improve in their vaguely stated writing goals, but also to "see through" the messages that bombarded them daily in the media. The last introduced Orwell's principles of Newspeak and doublespeak from 1984 as a frame of reference to guide their seeing through cultural myth and the language system used to sustain it. When contemporary technological society is perceived as analogous to Oceania in 1984, then questioning, thinking and writing critically

may be perceived more readily as important to human survival.

The choice of a text was crucial. I was obviously interested in one that was language oriented and included essays, poetry, fiction and, if possible, stimulating photographs. After much hunting, I chose R. Brent Bonah and Sheila Shively, eds. The Language Lens. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974. Other instructors might investigate and prefer S. I. Hayakawa, Language in Thought and Action or Wagner and Radner, Language & Reality: A Semantics Approach to Writing. There are many more rhetorics and essay collections published in the last five years focusing on language--Miller, Word, Self & Reality: The Rhetoric of Imagination; Escholtz, Rosa and Clar, Language Awareness; and Somer and Hay, The Language Experience, but they lacked photographs and/or literature.

I found that Language Lens was most suitable for my approach simply because the editors included five sections on perception that allow the instructor to vary the exercise, material and objective of instruction. I considered this introductory phase very important in not only enabling students to experience different language lenses -- photos, poetry and prose -- but also to be involved in the process of perceiving, thinking, remembering, organizing and recording.

In addition to perceiving and understanding biographical sketches through visual and verbal images from Language Lens, I asked students to start a personal journal where they would record dream fragments and significant daily perceptions and observations as well as their writing from class exercises.

One of the first exercises consisted of dividing the class into smaller groups of about six according to the photo they had selected. I asked them to list some of the things they saw and then write a paragraph organizing the details into a coherent verbal "message" that they perceived in the photograph. After they finished writing the paragraph, they each read their observations in turn to the rest of their group. I asked them to choose one paper to represent the group to the whole class and identify the criteria used to make their choice.

During the full class discussion, students were quick to notice that members of the same group emphasized entirely different items in the same photo. Even when they described the same "objective" reality, their language choice varied considerably as did their interpretation of the details of their perception. This exercise demonstrated more principles of language than originally intended, but the essential point discussed was that perception of reality was subjectively mixed with beliefs, feelings and self-concepts to the extent that some people had already constructed a "pattern" or mythic system into which their perceptions neatly fit. One romanticized what she perceived, whereas another saw political struggles underlying most of what de heard and saw. We also discussed the qualities of their writing that made their verbal renditions effective. Accurate and vivid word choice, imaginative comparisons, i.e., use of metaphor and simile, along with the organization of their description helped sharpen their recollection of the original photograph.

To reinforce the principle of subjective perception, I

introduced denotation and connotation, levels of meaning and multiordinality (violence$_1$ is not violence$_2$) in several in-class journal exercises. In one exercise, I asked students to record their reactions as either neutral, positive or negative to a series of words. In another, they briefly described what they pictured from each of the following stimulus words: first, "car," then, "chariot" and last, "pimpmobile". In the last exercise, I gave general instructions to guide them in an imaginary climb up a mountain. After they found their own way back, they were instructed to write the descriptive narrative of their adventure. After several had read their papers to the class, the class asked each writer questions to help sharpen the verbal portrait of their journey and transmit the mental pictures through verbal ones: How old were the people you met? What were you wearing? How did you feel about these people? etc. Some students remembered more about their own "trip" after they had heard others. They realized that there was much more going on their minds than they usually acknowledged and that they could have developed and clarified their simple narrative when they returned to revise it.

Most students began to realize that what they meant or had in mind was more effectively verbalized in word pictures and concrete images. They were not, however, all equally as ready to translate their understanding to their own writing. Nevertheless, many students wrote vivid, moving autobiographical essays in response to one of the following topics for their first formal written assignment.

Assignment #1

1. Choose an object, place or creature to symbolize you. Write a short description of the "symbol" and its relationship to you and your life. Why have you chosen it? What is its origin or place in your present "reality"? In what ways does it represent you?

2. Choose an actual photograph or vivid memory from your past that you feel marks a significant day or period in your life. Tell the story of the photograph/memory; describe the situation and the people involved; discuss the significance and meaning. What affect did the"memory" have on you and your life?

3. If you have or had a fantasy image of who you <u>really</u> are or were as a child (for example, a lost princess or prince; a savior or freedom fighter), write a paper describing the fantasy as completely and vividly as you can, trying to recreate it as you imagined it. Then explain what it was about the fantasy that seized your imagination. If the fantasy or self-image affected your actual life in any way, then or now, deal with that too.

The day a written assignment is due, I usually divide the class into groups of six to seven for the purposes of reading and hearing their own writing, receiving peer feedback on the writing objective, sharpening their ability to learn from others and developing criteria for effective writing. For the first assignment, the listeners were asked to: (1) identify the main impression or idea; (2) discuss the effectiveness of the writer's language and organization in conveying that impression; and (3) select the sections of the essay that were the most memorable or effective.

Sometimes the writer's intention does not match the reader's interpretation and both must return to the language lens to determine which side needs adjustment. The full class then discussed unresolved issues. If there is time, I show them the following cartoon --

HENRY MARTIN

"Can I have him call you back, Ottie? He's busy at the moment reviewing the events of his life with an eye toward bringing them together in a meaningful and insightful autobiography of great power, thrust, and relevance, especially for those concerned with the destiny of mankind today in an increasingly intolerant environment."

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Once students understand the relativity of perception and meaning, I continue developing critical thinking by encouraging them to question the subjectivity in the writing of others, the way they define key words, omit details, underplay or highlight

selectively or use euphemisms. Some students began to recognize how they rarely knew what they meant by the abstract words and slogans they freely used. They didn't remember where they had learned the slogan, but usually felt everyone knew what they meant. They were not yet aware that words as symbols could be culturally as well as operationally defined.

We critically examined the meanings of key words used in advertisements and discovered how those contexts created meanings that enhanced a product. Connections were made to political language and euphemisms that attempted to blur and disguise a reality instead of sharpen and clarify it. In one of their journal exercises, I asked them to derive a definition of one abstract word such as "success, love, education or liberation" without using other abstract words. Their task was to create the image or story from their own experience that would best illustrate their understanding of what the word meant. I urged them to consider using metaphors to explain their meaning. The results were impressive. Their vision was original and vivid. I can't explain why, but some of the best writing from this particular class emerged spontaneously in this class exercise.

I felt they were ready for the next phase -- giving their own definition and interpretation of a general statement, i.e., someone else's hypothesis. The second formal assignment also introduced the notion of the main idea or thesis statement that had to be supported with specific illustrations. From creating operational definitions for abstract words, we moved to explaining and defining general statements and hypotheses. In both cases, I used the general semantics "abstraction ladder" described by S.I. Hayakawa

to illustrate how a concrete word can suggest increasingly abstract words as one moved from the actual experience to general categories and associations. For example, "cow" could be considered "wealth" at a much higher level of abstraction even though "wealth" is far removed from the concrete image of "cow" and, conversely, "wealth," at the top of the abstraction ladder, could lead to "cow" as each rung becomes a further refinement of the kind of wealth the writer means. What is important is that the characteristics of the original "word" change as the general label or classifier changes and becomes more removed from the original experience.

My objective in the second formal assignment was to have them derive their own definition and meaning of a particular statement and discuss the validity of the statement in terms of a range of possibility instead of in true or false extremes. The second assginment was written after we had read Orwell's "Politics and the English Language," but before we had discussed 1984.

Assignment #2

Directions: Choose ONE of the following quotations as a focus for a well-organized, coherent essay. Explain the extent to which you perceive the statement (hypothesis) as valid. The quotations are broad, so you will need specific examples to support what you say. Consider describing contexts and/or narrating anecdotes that demonstrate, concretely, your point of view.

(1) "...political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible" (George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language")

(2) "The limits of my language are the limits of my world." (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

(3) "Racial intolerance is probably based on the linguistic more than any other factor." (Mario Pei, "The Indispensibility of Language")

(4) "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains." (Jean-Jacques Rousseau)

In addition to exercises in the process of abstraction, class reading and discussion focused on the implications of the structural and lexical properties of English as a special "lens" shaping perception. Besides helping students understand different levels of meaning and abstraction, I thought that their insights into language and meaning and English, in particular, would increase their understanding of the thought control of Newspeak. Since legitimate memory and meaning came entirely from Big Brother, students could then appreciate how subjective experience was antithetical to the politics of Oceania where words with fixed meanings were the acknowledged reality and personal experience and memory, a thoughtcrime. The totalitarianism of Newspeak becomes an even greater shock after students have experienced how language, in general, and their own, in particular, shapes thought and arbitrarily classifies and structures reality.

In addition to the principles I've already described, we discussed the rigidity of absolute statements of allness that students had frequently used in class discussion, such as "society is to blame," "all policemen are corrupt" and "everyone knows...;" and the illusion of total equation in the "is" of identity -- "She <u>is</u> intelligent," "He <u>is</u> stupid," "War <u>is</u> Peace" and "Love <u>is</u> Hate.

I don't have time to elaborate on some of these as well as other principles we discussed, but I do want to emphasize how the

first part of the course focused on the relationship between their experience and the language they used to communicate that experience. In focusing our attention on the society of 1984 where personal experience was denied and deliberately distorted through language and myth, the novel could then dramatize to students the dangers of even the ignorant distortions and sloppiness that they generally function with in reading and writing messages.

Once they had been prepared for the language and thought control of 1984 and had begun reading the novel, I directed our class discussions and exercises toward answering the following questions: what is doublespeak; why does it encourage "uncritical" thinking; in what contexts does English become doublespeak; and lastly, how does your own writing commit doublespeak?

Several in-class exercises evolved answers to the questions in this phase of the course. One exercise consisted of their thinking of alternative hypotheses to explain the data contained in several one paragraph excerpts. They were also asked to decide which of the hypotheses offered the most satisfactory explanation for the evidence and what evidence would have to be added or omitted for each hypothesis to be valid.

Another exercise demonstrated the difference between fact and inference when the only facts are those presented in words. William V. Haney's "Uncritical Inference Test" sharpened their ability to discriminate between the meaning of "a cash register" and "the cash register," review connotation and denotation in realizing that "killed" is not synonymous to "murder" or "foul deed," and finally recognize how easily past conditioning leads them to

inferences that may or may not be true, but, which they, nevertheless, regard as fact. The "Uncritical Inference Test" is a humbling experience for even the most rigidly dogmatic students who initially insist that all of their inferences are really facts.

We read supporting articles from the text, Language Lens, to further clarify the difference between statements of fact, report, judgment and inference and then examine advertisements students bring to class in order to apply their understanding to familiar modern contexts. From the advertisements, we derive a definition of "doublespeak" that parallels and expands upon that in 1984. I prepare them for the final phase of the course in recommending that they keep their own file of "doublespeak" examples found in newspapers, magazines, etc. and to be especially watchful during the political campaigns before and after election day.

They become accomplices to their own learning as they list the features of doublespeak and "Newspeak". We begin to discover and discuss how closely the qualities of their own writing and the advertisements they so casually criticized resemble the features of a language that Orwell says is chiefly patterned to "limit the range of thought".

According to Orwell, Newspeak would limit the range of thought by not only reducing the meaning of unorthodox words like "free," but also by reducing the useable vocabulary. Since they've already realized that their "useable" vocabulary is based on what they can learn and retrieve with the least effort, this awareness may even jolt them into expanding vocabulary and thinking. By the time we're through, we've added some common student weaknesses in writing to the list: imprecise and limited vocabulary;

omissions; circumlocutions; tautologies; repetitions; and rigid definitions.

By the time students start the third formal assignment, we have already criticized the language and logic of several kinds of articles, including advertisements, in addition to having read and discussed the role of language in shaping thought and behavior in 1984. The third assignment becomes an opportunity for students to independently apply what they have learned in criticizing an article or advertisement of their own choosing.

Assignment #3

Directions: Criticize the writing and thinking of either an article of your own choosing or an article discussed in class, or an advertisement in a magazine or newspaper. Consider the following in your discussion:

1. What are the author's hypotheses? What assumptions do these hypotheses seem to be founded on? What assumptions does the writer make about the audience? What data are cited to derive the hypotheses? Evaluate the use of data, assumptions, hypotheses and logical development. To what extent are inferences and conclusions based on evidence (factual) and/or opinions and judgments?

2. Evaluate the use of language: How does the writer exploit connotation in word choice? How are figures of speech and propaganda techniques used effectively, unfairly or inappropriately? What statements are misleading or used to "cover up" and disguise information. (For ads, describe the non-verbal content.)

3. To what extent is there faulty logic? That is, conclusions are erroneously drawn from the data reported or alternative conclusions are not considered, even though they may be just as

valid. Is the writer consistent? Do serious contradictions in evidence and thinking emerge?

4. What is your concluding evaluation of the writer's style, ideas, and purpose? What are the "politics" of the writer's English language?

To assist them in selecting an article I allow them to choose one that we criticized in class (See Appendix A). The strong student will go beyond the class discussion, whereas the weaker students have more problems organizing their thoughts and get easily distracted by irrelevancies in spite of what was explained in class. Nevertheless, I chose the article for the controversial nature of the thesis as well as for the apparent weaknesses in the argument. When the paper is due, it is read and criticized for the fairness and clarity of the student's criticism. My purpose is to have them be more accurate and clear in their criticism than the writer had been in his argument. For some, this is the most difficult assignment of the term, for others, the most stimulating and rewarding.

In the fourth assignment, I ask students to take the role of the persuader. Now that they have "seen through" the deceptions of others, I ask them to persuade someone of the validity of their point of view <u>without</u> doublespeaking their audience. They are thus required to consider their audience, the purpose of their message and the kind of evidence and argument that would be most effective, clear and honest.

Assignment #4

Directions: Take a stand on a problem area that is either of public or personal concern and persuade your "readers" to support your position. Choose ONE of the following topics as a starting point. Be sure to identify the problem by describing and defining the key issues you're dealing with as well as the actions and/or solutions you recommend. Be aware of the audience you're trying to persuade. Your objective is to persuade without distorting information in "doublespeak".

1. Discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the main ideas and opinions expressed in a newspaper column or editorial. Persuade your reader to follow the original author's recommendations or your own. (Include the original article with your paper; you may want to use a "letter to the editor" format for your essay.)

2. Define a social or personal dilemma that might be addressed to a columnist like "Dear Abby". Include your understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of each possible solution. Write your solution and convincing rationale. Consider how you would persuade someone to take your advice.

3. Write a letter to convince someone to give you what you want: for example, (1) a job, (2) a raise, (c) custody of the children. Persuade a local or national representative to support your interests and/or change their policies.

At this point, class discussions consist of students presenting selections from newspapers and magazines that demonstrate some kind of doublespeak. I usually cite some of the nominations from past NCTE doublespeak awards.

Discussion of the fourth assignment is centered on the extent to which student writing is convincing without committing doublespeak. Before I divide the class into small groups to critique each other's persuasion paper, we review some of the characteristics of doublespeak that we've recognized in advertisements, public writing, the media and their own writing: (1) absolute statements, (2) over-generalized or over-simplified statements, (3) reliance on cliché or slogans (rigid and limited meaning and vocabulary), (4) omission of relevant supporting evidence, (5) digressions and irrelevancies, (6) redundancies and tautologies, (7) vague and/or imprecise language, and (8) sexist or racist language.

The last assignment for the non-literary part of the course is a documented report. Students have the option of describing the doublespeak uncovered in a particular issue, political campaign or legal case in the past or present. Some of the suggestions included:

Assignment #5

1. To what extent does our society resemble Oceania, 1984? Consider differences and similarities. Document the resemblance by referring to first hand observation, news items, magazine articles, etc. Assess the "resemblance". What problems do you see? What "solutions" would you recommend?

2. Explain the extent to which doublespeak has been used in a particular social-political context. Derive a definition of doublespeak from 1984 and your own research. Research the background. What makes it doublespeak? Who used the doublespeak and

for what end? Point out the dishonest use of language and the omissions;

Suggestions: Watergate; Anita Bryant's campaign against gays; abortion on demand vs. right to life; an election campaign; an advertising campaign; contexts where racist or sexist doublespeak are evident.

From what students actually wrote, I would have to say that my plans were too ambitious in introducing and applying critical thinking to their writing and reading. Although students originally registered for this course on the basis of high placement test scores, their own motivation and intellectual maturity in accepting challenging assignments was relatively low. They were generally resistant to anything that pulled them beyond what they already knew. A few students grasped the language principles and applied them with wit and insight in their writing. Most learned something about language even though their written performance was usually mediocre, at best.

After only one attempt at this approach, I believe that more time and experience are needed for each phase and that "critical thinking"is one of the most difficult skills to teach since "thinking" itself is generally painful to the average student and met with more resistance than even the most sugar-coated exercises and games can overcome.

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